

# Ethan Allen Institute

Newsletter - May 2014 (Printer Edition)

---

## Commentary: When Imagination Fails, Raise School Property Taxes

by John McClaughry

The heavily Democratic Vermont House has passed a bill (H.889) designed to squeeze out enough new dollars to keep the Education Fund solvent for 2015. Republicans voted No on the higher education property tax rates, and their state chairman declared that the Democrats' passage of the bill was a "cold and callous action".

Let's take a trip down memory lane to see how we got to this point. In 1994 Gov. Howard Dean, then in his parsimonious phase, froze the amount of state aid distributions to school districts under the under the Foundation Plan. A group of disappointed money seekers, led by Rutland Northeast Supt. William Mathis (now a Shumlin appointee to the State Board of Education) and ACLU co-counsel Peter Welch (now a Congressman), brought a case to the Vermont Supreme Court. They made the highly imaginative argument that the "common benefit" clause of the Constitution (adopted in 1777 to outlaw special favors to cronies) somehow required property-rich districts to share their property base with property-poor districts. The Court, led by Justice John Dooley (still a Justice), gave them everything they wanted (without even a trial!).

The 1996 Brigham decision held that all school districts had to have "substantially equal ...access to tax resources." Armed with this judicial mandate, the Democratic legislature joyously pushed through Act 60 of 1997 with its "shark pool" of revenue redistribution.

Act 60 broke the link between your school budget and your school property tax rate. It also conferred enormous and long-sought regulatory power on the State Board and Department of Education.

When popular resistance to the Act 60 shark pool mounted, the Republican legislature and Governor of 2003 enacted Act 68. The revised law tried to brake that spending by tying the "district spending adjustment" of the education residential property tax rate to the amount spent above a legislatively-set dollar amount. In 2014, if a district's voters spent 20% over \$9,151 per pupil, their residential property tax rate would increase by 20% over the state-set 94 cents per \$100 of fair market value.

But those brake shoes aren't slowing down the spending bus. The link between education spending per pupil and the residential property tax rate is still there, but it's not at all obvious to the voters of any given district, because the tax revenues are all shipped off to Montpelier for redistribution through the Education Fund.

The legislature's duty is to keep that Fund full enough to cover the budgets sent in for

payment by the 277 school districts. They could, but won't, add another penny to the sales and use tax (which the Republicans did to pass Act 68), or increase the General Fund contribution beyond \$296 million when that Fund is again \$70 million in the red. That leaves them with raising the two school property tax rates, and trying to find some new brake shoes to slow down local spenders without hammering them over the head with state spending restraint mandates.

Hence the present bill, that raises the residential base rate from 94 cents to 98 cents per \$100 of Fair Market Value and the nonresidential base rate from \$1.44 to \$1.515. The bill also increases the Base Education Spending Amount from \$9,151 to \$9,382. That is well under the 4.2% residential property tax rate increase, and thus inflates the district spending adjustment that translates to higher residential tax rates. The Republicans countered with a proposal to scrap the whole system for 2017 and concoct something else (details not even hinted at). The Democrats voted that down and passed their alternative for feeding the education monster: creating a new education income tax in 2017.

The bottom line here is that legislators of both parties are facing politically unsustainable public school spending. The Democrats are doggedly using the tools of their beloved Act 60 to raise ever more revenues. They are also rushing forward with mandatory consolidation into Regional Education Districts that they believe might save a little money (but almost certainly won't). Looking ahead, they have now gone on record in favor of raising income taxes.

The Republicans blame the Democrats for raising property taxes, but if the Republicans were in the majority they'd have to do exactly the same thing – unless they could come up with some magical new scheme, about which they seem to have no clue.

There is an alternative: changing the ponderous and increasingly state-controlled monopoly school system to a model built upon parental choice and provider competition. That seems to be well beyond the imagination of either quarrelling party.

*- John McClaughry is vice president of the Ethan Allen Institute oversight*

## **Commentary: Vermont Should Be in Pictures**

*By Rob Roper*

After college I worked for two years in Japan. My boss was an Indian born Australian who grew up in Thailand. In our discussions about the United States, he repeatedly told me in terms vivid enough that I remember them twenty years later that the one place he wanted to visit in the world was Vermont.

Why Vermont? He had seen the images of the Green Mountain State on the popular television show *Newhart*, which took place in a traditional Vermont bed & breakfast. This is how powerful the Vermont Brand and the imagery behind it can be. It can stir the imagination of people from totally different cultures half the globe away. This is why it is surprising that our state government doesn't do more (or, actually, anything) to actively bring television and movie production here. In fact, our tax policies are inexplicably hostile to it.

Captain Richard Phillips, the subject of the Tom Hanks film that bears his name,

was recently asked, “How do you feel about the Underhill, VT scenes having been filmed in Sudbury, Mass?” The Captain replied, “You cannot get Vermont into Massachusetts by any angle of the lens – all Vermonters know that, and I grew up in Winchester, Mass. I wished they had filmed in Vermont, for the benefit of the workers and people of Vermont.” (DestinationVT, 9/16/13)

So, why didn't they? Taxes.

It's no great revelation that movie-makers, like anyone else, go where their money is treated well. It's why the famous “Spaghetti Westerns” were filmed in Italy and not in Tombstone, Arizona. But many states are catching on to the idea of cultivating film production as an economic driver.

Just this past month, for example, the state of Maryland came up with an \$11.5 million package of tax credits to keep the hit Netflix show, *House of Cards*, filming in their state. Governor Martin O'Malley explained, “We're going to keep the 3,700 jobs and more than \$100 million of economic activity and investment that *House of Cards* generates right here in Maryland.” (Variety, 4/25/14)

Massachusetts (who played the part of Vermont in *Captain Phillips*) saw the potential for development of the film industry back in 2006 when their legislature implemented an aggressive set of incentives to lure production to their state.

According to the Massachusetts Film Office, “Companies that produce at least half their projects in Massachusetts receive credits equal to 25 percent of their costs. This, combined with a sales tax exemption and payroll credit for big projects, makes Massachusetts one of the production-friendliest states in the country.”

Vermont, by contrast, lists but one incentive: “Vermont provides income tax credits to out-of-state residents performing in films shot in the state. The credit equals the difference between the tax on the income earned in Vermont at the highest rate in the performer's home state and the Vermont tax.” (State Film Tax Incentives, 5/10/11) Gee, thanks.

Back in 2011, Vermonters Len Britton and Brad Broyles pitched a screenplay about an underdog team of downhill ski racers titled *Woodchucks*. The movie was set in Vermont, and Britton and Broyles wanted it to be filmed in Vermont. For a brief while there was a buzz of excitement that this would be the case.

That dream fizzled because of Vermont's tax policy. As Britton explained to me, “When you're trying to raise \$10 million to make an independent film, the first question you're asked [by potential financiers] is what kind of rebate or incentive are you getting? If the answer is ‘none,’ they're going to shut the door on you.” And that's what happened.

But, can you imagine the economic benefit Vermont would reap from a globally distributed film, shot on location in what we all believe is the most beautiful place in the world about a key pillar of tourism industry? People still travel to Salzburg to see the place where the *Sound of Music* was filmed.

Instead, Britton and Broyles' film is now in production with a new name, *No Limits*, and in a new country. “It's going to be a picture postcard for skiing in Austria and not for skiing in Vermont,” said Britton.

What a shame! If the minute-long opening credits to *Newhart* could convince my old friend Shapoor to come here from all the way from Tokyo, just think of what a two hour theater experience could accomplish.

The Vermont Brand has taken a serious hit in 2014 over the heroin epidemic for which we have become both national poster child and punching bag. Our image and our

economy could use a Hollywood makeover. It is an industry where we can and should compete. Vermont is ready for her close up. Are our politicians?

*- Rob Roper is president of the Ethan Allen Institute*

## Commentary: The Latest Shumlin “Economic Progress” Idea

*by John McClaughry*

Is Vermont on the road to becoming a prosperous state with a strong economy and plentiful job openings? Or will its economy – despite some recent positive indicators - face a continuing struggle under the weight of too much high-cost government, only selectively alleviated by politically designed subsidy programs?

In a March 27 news release Gov. Peter Shumlin highlighted the good news. The Opportunity Index, calculated by a broad group of civic organizations, ranked Vermont Number 1 in the nation. Its calculation included unemployment rate, poverty percentage, median income, housing costs, low crime rate, and high school graduation rates. Vermont's commendably high rates of group membership and volunteerism made the point that we have an active and concerned citizenry. Vermonters can rightly be proud of this.

On the economic side, Shumlin was quick to tout the February unemployment rate (now at 3.4% for March), as the second lowest in the nation after booming North Dakota. He also announced a collection of taxpayer financed grants, loans and credits, and one really worthwhile and long overdue regulatory change: a Vermont Small Business Offering Exemption that will allow more Vermonters to invest in the stock of local businesses.

On April 15 Shumlin announced his bold new idea for strengthening the private economy. He proposes to assign \$5 million "in surplus money" to a "Vermont Enterprise Incentive Fund". It would allow him, the governor, to distribute cash to "help Vermont compete for businesses looking to relocate and to keep businesses already in the state." The \$5 million budget surplus, if it ever materializes, would put this fund in line ahead of the underfunded Rainy Day Fund, which is the final destination of any surviving surplus dollars.

It surely seems strange that a governor, flanked by his legislative leaders, would orchestrate the announcement of a paltry \$5 million fund, which might or might not ever appear, to compensate certain businesses firms enough for their higher costs of doing business in Vermont for them to locate or remain here.

Cynics will observe that the governor wants the discretion to distribute these grants in the way that most accrues to his political advantage. They may recall Gov. Dean, who in 1993 announced a similar "economic progress" program. As proposed by Dean, any company that qualified for state assistance would have to go to the governor - him - for final approval. Fortunately, the legislature wouldn't buy that "Boss Tweed provision", but Shumlin is trying again.

Shumlin wants the public to believe that dispensing \$5 million taken from the taxpayers to a handful of favored businesses selected by him will improve Vermont's economy. Balance that against these anti-business factors:

- Vermont has the ninth highest state and local tax burden in the nation;
- Vermont electricity costs are among the highest in the nation (thanks in no small part to Shumlin's solar and wind subsidies extracted from helpless ratepayers);
- The Vermont legislature has just enacted a job-killing minimum wage increase to the highest in the nation;
- Vermont has a combined \$3.3 billion actuarial shortfall in its two retirement funds, and the only way the Treasurer can think of to prevent further teachers' fund robbing is to "borrow" health benefit costs from the Rainy Day Fund;
- Vermont has a bonded debt to GDP ratio of 17.1%, highest in the nation;
- Vermont exhibits a mountainous tangle of job-killing state regulations;
- The legislature has just approved a 7.5 cents per \$100 of fair market value school property tax rate increase for businesses and landowners
- Vermont's strongly pro-spending and pro-union legislature shows no signs of curbing its zeal; and, to top it off,
- The governor's largest looming problem is how to extract \$2 billion in new taxes to finance his Green Mountain Care starting in 2017.

Suddenly that \$5 million - if it ever materializes - doesn't look like much, unless your business happens to be a favorite of the governor who will dispense the cash.

*- John McClaughry is the vice president of the Ethan Allen Institute.*

---

## Events

**May 14.** Shayne Spence will speak to the Morrisville Rotary Club at the Stonegrill, noon.

**May 17.** Leadership & Activist Training Session, Rutland. The Ethan Allen Institute is happy to announce that is it partnering with American Majority to hold another New Leaders and Activist Training session! Register Online at:

When: Saturday, May 17th from 9:30 AM to 3 PM. Registration will open at 9 AM.  
Where: Rutland Area Christian School, Rutland, VT Cost: Registration is \$20 (\$10 for students) and includes lunch and all training materials.

Training Topics:

- Mastering Campaign Planning: A campaign without a plan won't get very far- this covers what a campaign plan should look like, what should be on it, and how

- detailed and flexible it should be.
- Making the Ask: Fundraising and Budgeting: Who to ask, how to ask and how it will be spent.
  - Connecting with Voters: Finding information on who votes, contacting voters through direct contact and GOTV efforts.

**May 23.** EAI president Rob Roper will speak on the subject of “The Politics Behind Public Education Policy,” at the Equinox Village in Manchester, Vermont.

---

## Roll Call Reports

House Passes \$62 Million Property Tax Increase (89-51).  
House Blocks Amendment to Repeal and Replace Act 60/68 Education Finance System (49-83)  
House Passes \$10.10 Minimum Wage (87-57)  
House Votes to Require Labeling of (Some) Genetically Modified Foods (114-30)  
Senate Votes to Require Labeling of (Some) Genetically Modified Foods. (26-2)

---

## News & Views

**Win for Transparency:** The joint EAI-PAI vttransparency.org website was cited as a major factor in Vermont’s getting an upgraded A- rating from US PIRG for transparency in state government. Said US PIRG (parent group of VPIRG) “Vermont unveiled a new checkbook tool that enables users to view the state’s payments to vendors from 66 departments, agencies and other government entities dating back to fiscal year 2011.” (5/8/14).

**McClaghry’s Book Review in Reason Magazine.** *Politics on a Human Scale: The American Tradition of Decentralism* is the title of a new book by Iowa political scientist Jeff Taylor. It chronicles the deterioration of the once dominant Jefferson-Bryan - LaFollette limited government individualist decentralism into the bipartisan big government statist collectivism of both Roosevelts, Bushes, Clintons, and disappointingly, even Reagan. EAI founder John McClaghry offers a well-informed review of the book in the May issue of Reason magazine (“Free Minds and Free Markets”) ([www.reason.com](http://www.reason.com)).

### **Vermont Ranks 49<sup>th</sup> in ALEC’s “Rich States Poor States.”**

“Vermont has one of the worst economic outlooks in the nation according to new report that ranks states on economic competitiveness...When it comes to tax and regulatory policies that produce economic growth, Vermont ranks 49th in the nation. The ranking appears in the 2014 Rich States, Poor States report released [April 15] by the American Legislative Exchange Council.

The Green Mountain State has remained at the bottom of the heap every year

since the report was first published in 2008... The states with the best economic outlook include Utah, South Dakota, Indiana, North Dakota and Idaho. States locked in a race to the bottom include New York, Vermont, Illinois, California and Minnesota.”

“Rich States, Poor States arrives at its rankings by examining 15 policy variables related to tax rates, regulatory burdens and labor policies. “ – Bruce Parker, Vermont Watchdog

**Vermont’s Tax Burden.** The Tax Foundation’s latest ranking of states for their combined state and local tax burden (percent of personal income taken in taxes) ranks Vermont 9th (10.5%). New Hampshire is ranked 40th (8.0%) Vermont has ranked in the top ten for decades.

**Vermont’s Debt Burden.** “Quebec’s bonded debt of \$161 billion represents 46.6 percent of GDP. The highest level of bonded debt to GDP in the United States is found in Vermont, which has a bonded-debt-to-GDP ratio of 17.1 per cent. New York’s total bonded debt is close to, but still less than, Quebec’s at \$142.7 billion.” - Fraser Institute (BC).

**Vermont Education Spending.** “According to the U.S. Department of Education, Vermont’s per pupil spending was about \$17,400 per year in school year 2010-11. That’s 45 percent above the U.S. average... Vermont’s student spending is well above the U.S. average and double that of Texas. Yet Vermont’s non-minority students, which is virtually all students in Vermont, do worse than non-minority Texas students on every one of these tests at both grade levels. They also underperform non-minority students nationwide on three of the four NAEP tests. And Texas’ better performance occurs in a state that spends far less than Vermont.” – Dr. Art Woolf (VTDigger 4/17/14)

**CATO Study: No correlation between education spending and outcomes.** Andrew Coulson is author of the Cato Institute’s, "State Education Trends: Academic Performance and Spending over the Past 40 Years," The study shows that while spending has just about tripled in inflation-adjusted dollars and the number of school employees has almost doubled since 1970, reading, math and science scores for students have remained stagnant. "In virtually every other field, productivity has risen over this period thanks to the adoption of countless technological advances - advances that, in many cases, would seem ideally suited to facilitating learning. And yet, surrounded by this torrent of progress, education has remained anchored to the riverbed, watching the rest of the world rush past it." Read the study at <http://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/state-education-trend>.

**Howard Dean Endorses Charter Schools.** Former Gov. Howard Dean told a student group at Castleton State College (3/31/14) that after seeing how “the charter school movement is transforming inner city education” in New Orleans, “in a moment I changed my entire philosophy of education.” He now supports charter schools, at least if they’re nonprofit, at least if they’re serving deprived inner cities.

This an historic reversal for Dean, who emphatically opposed charter school proposals in the 1990s and contrived to stack a legislative study committee with NEA teachers, which led to it reject charter school proposals.

Interestingly, Dean attended private schools himself: Browning School (NYC)

and St. George's Prep (Newport RI).

**School Vouchers Seen Driving Home Values** This is the headline for a Rutland Herald story (4/21/14) describing a study by former UVM professor David Harrison, now of Texas Tech. The study concluded, "homes in towns that have high school choice sell for 5.9% more than comparable homes in similar towns that have an assigned high school." Harrison said, "What was surprising was the magnitude of the difference."

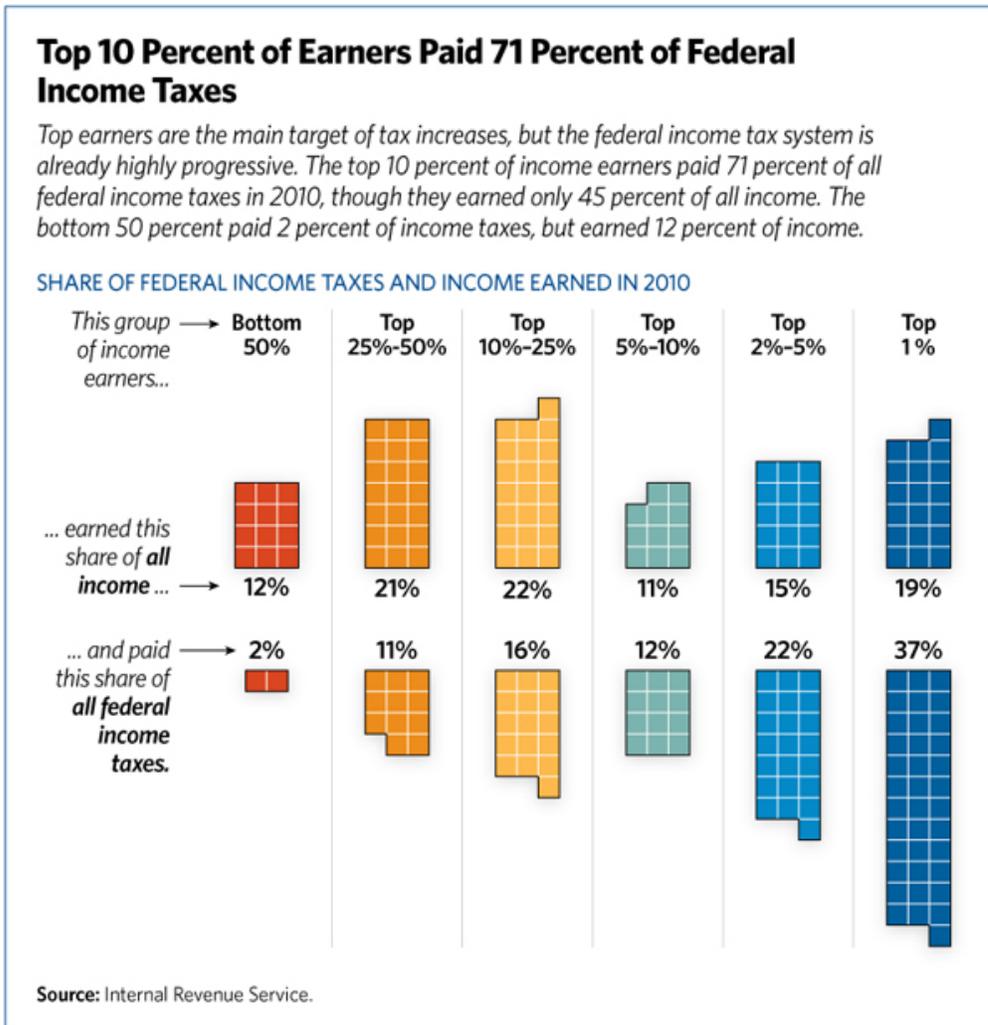
**Wind Power Subsidy Extension.** "The wind industry is claiming like all businesses it wants certainty, predictability, and stability. Perhaps the industry should assure its product, electricity, has characteristics of certainty, predictability, and stability. Then, the industry would not need subsidies." (SEPP 3/22/14)

**Oh, the Irony.** A number of news outlets are reporting on left wing columnist/economist Paul Krugman's sweetheart deal in which he will receive \$25,000 per month plus a \$10,000 annual stipend for research and travel in exchange for what is described as a "modest role" participating in public events focusing on the topic of (drumroll please)... income inequality. Well, that certainly does make him an expert.

**More Irony.** As millions of Americans trudged through the forms and wrote out the checks to pay their taxes this past April 15th, the IRS was busy paying out about \$1 million in bonuses to 1,100 employees who were "in trouble over tax related issues," including, "willful understatement of tax liabilities [and] late payments and under-reporting of income," according to the report issued by the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration. The report says that providing awards to employees who fail to pay taxes "appears to create a conflict with the IRS's charge of ensuring the integrity of the system of tax administration." Yes. Yes, it does.

**Government Waste.** A recent Reason-Rupe poll finds that Americans think their government wastes fifty cents of every dollar they hand over in taxes. In fact, the middle half of Americans thinks government wastes anywhere from 30 cents to 80 cents of every tax dollar. <http://reason.com/poll/2014/04/03/americans-say-75-percent-of-politicians>

**And, whose money is being wasted?** The Heritage Foundation put together a chart detailing who is picking up the tab for federal income taxes.



Reduce the Tax Burden Chart 1 • Federal Budget in Pictures 2014 heritage.org

**Bill McKibben is “lying to people,” says environmentalist.** British environmental activist Paul Kingsnorth was recently interviewed in the New York Times Magazine. Though he still believes in anthropogenic global warming, he doesn’t believe people can realistically do anything to stop it. Kingsnorth explained, “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t sit here saying: ‘Yes, comrades, we must act! We only need one more push, and we’ll save the world!’ I don’t believe it.’ Movements like Bill McKibben’s 350.org, for instance, might engage people, Kingsnorth told me, but they have no chance of stopping climate change. ‘I just wish there was a way to be more honest about that,’ he went on, ‘because actually what McKibben’s doing, and what all these movements are doing, is selling people a false premise. They’re saying, ‘If we take these actions, we will be able to achieve this goal.’ And if you can’t, and you know that, then you’re lying to people.’” <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/20/magazine/its-the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it-and-he-feels-fine.html>

**Wall Street Journal on Climate Report:** “The [UN-sponsored] IPCC supports the very regulation, income redistribution and politically favored misallocation of resources that will make the world poorer—and less able to adapt if the climate threat proves to be as real as the U.N.’s computer models claim.” (WSJ 4/6/14)

**Holy Mao!** Vermont Representative Rebecca Ellis (D-Waterbury) questioned whether democracy was good for the environment during a hearing on the IPPC report at the State House. Ellis asked, “I am curious, are there any other political structures that are more successful in reducing greenhouse gasses than others.... All of us in this room grew up in a democracy, and we all tend to think that democracies do things best. I’m wondering if the reports are proving that out.” See the video.

**Good-by local control.** “The State Board of Education, in a typically meaningless flight of rhetoric, declares the [school district consolidation] bill will enable all students to ‘thrive and prosper.’ No one is against children thriving and prospering. The question is who gets to decide what’s good for your kids, what thriving and prospering look like for your children. This bill says it’s not up to towns, and it’s not up to parents. In place of towns and parents the Legislature would insert itself and its new mandated, expanded districts. That arrogance is unconscionable.” – Peter Berger from his column, *Poor Elijah’s Almanac*.

**On Happiness:** “Happiness must be earned. Only free people who can pursue their own truths can achieve happiness. Being free does not guarantee happiness. But not being free destroys the potential to be happy.” – John Allison, Cato Institute President (1/9/14)

---

## Book of the Month

*The End of Big: How the Internet Makes David the New Goliath*  
By Nicco Mele,  
New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013

Nicco Mele is a young member of the Harvard Kennedy School faculty, who was among the first to discern that the “radical connectivity” of the Internet and its social media applications would inevitably cause enormous disruptions to the disadvantage of traditional Big Institutions.

In this long-awaited book Mele explores how the Internet can make much of our world irrelevant. He approvingly quotes Branfman and Beckstrom: “Decentralization has been lying dormant for thousands of years. But the advent of the Internet has unleashed this force, knocking down traditional businesses, altering entire industries, affecting how we related to each other, and influencing world politics. The absences of structure, leadership, and formal organization, once considered a weakness, has become a major asset.”

Mele examines in turn Big News (media), Big Political Parties, Big Fun (entertainment), Big Government, Big Armies, Big Minds, and Big Companies. He concludes that the widespread use of the new technologies is inevitably leading to Big Opportunities for those who grasp its implications.

Mele knows firsthand how digital applications are revolutionizing Big Politics. He was the Internet director of Howard Dean’s 2004 Democratic presidential campaign, which he enthusiastically describes as “the most exciting story in Democratic politics in

decades.” That, despite the fact that Dean finished third in the Iowa Caucuses (17%, carried only 2 counties) and never won a caucus or primary other than Vermont’s.

Young Mele was beguiled by Dean, “a nonpolitician, a medical doctor”. Despite his mastery of the internet, Mele apparently missed the glaring fact of Dean’s unbroken twenty two year immersion in Democratic politics in Vermont – to the detriment of his medical practice – beginning with his election to the House in 1982.

Though Mele obviously relishes his path-breaking service to the Dean campaign, the real story is not Dean’s early and ignominious exit, but the techniques developed by Mele and others to bring thousands of interested voters into the Dean “meet ups”, and to raise millions of dollars through Internet solicitations.

From that political campaign Mele tracks his theme through the other large institutions. He argues cogently that “radical connectivity” (cloud computing, crowdsourcing, open sourcing, 3-D printing, digital currency, etc.) will undermine big corporations, big government, big publishing, and much more.

He does raise one important question: just which Even Bigger organizations (Google, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) will control the Internet platforms upon and through which much of this exciting activity will occur? These behemoths, Mele believes, will somehow have to be controlled, and if all other techniques fail, somebody (who?) will have to step in and “enforce civic responsibility”.

His final conclusion is worth pondering: “The next decade will belong to those who can take the ground-up, grassroots energy unleashed by radical connectivity, marry it with effective, engaged leadership, and craft stable and responsive institutions. In other words, it will belong to those who gaze beyond the chaos of the End of Big, glimpsing one last big that stands unscathed: Big Opportunity”.

– Review by John McClaughry, vice president of the Ethan Allen Institute

---

## Final Thought

### Why Every Voter in Vermont Should See Ken Burns’ “The Address.”

By Bruce E. Buxton

Although Ken Burns’ new documentary *The Address* is not in any overt way about politics, it contains a host of lessons for voters. As well, it is a caution for Vermont politicians in and out of the Vermont Agency of Education.

At Vermont’s Greenwood School, an independent boarding school in Putney for 50 special-needs boys, the students are asked to memorize and recite the Gettysburg Address. That would be a daunting task for me, although as I look at graduation programs in Vermont schools when Calvin Coolidge attended St. Johnsbury Academy, I notice that such a performance was once a routine expectation for Vermont high school graduates.

Burns stumbled on The Greenwood School’s unusual approach to special needs education and decided to make a documentary of its means and ends. Burns himself is an example of what he found himself filming: an imaginative person addressing a difficult problem. Burns admitted that his usual techniques did not serve the situation he wanted to

film: the daily struggle of students to master a serious and complex challenge. That these particular students were unaccustomed to achievement added to the challenge.

The Burns film shows what happens when a school's mission is driven by the imagination of its leaders and is designed to honor the imagination of its students. It shows what can happen when all of the bureaucratic pieties and Behaviorist process (inventory standards, standardized tests, licensing processes, accreditation punch-lists) are subordinated to a driving impulse from within the school to attach the daily business of instruction not to process but to actual performance.

What happens in a school when a performance is preferred to the forms of performance? What happens in a school when accountability is attached to results?

The Burns film is one of the few documentaries about education that does not try to address some particular political agenda. Nor does it try to sell a program of instruction. No one is likely to watch the film and install a "Gettysburg Address Curriculum." Instead, Burns' documentary reveals the way imagination can play out in the life of a serious school.

Anyone who prates about the failure of Vermont's independent schools to conform to the Special Needs Curriculum orthodoxies in our public schools fails to understand that, just as there are many kinds of toasters, cars, and religions, there are many approaches to special needs education. There is no single revealed Special Needs truth. There is no orthodox toaster.

Recent legislative proposals to require that Vermont's independent schools conform to the received wisdom of the Vermont Agency of Education's approved programs is an exercise in every way fantastic. And profound ignorance of both curriculum design and of Vermont history allows such cynical fantasy. Perhaps the Vermont legislators who would force Vermont's independent schools to conform to the process orthodoxies approved by the Agency should get out more.

Nationally, independent schools have pioneered some of the most interesting approaches to special needs education. Vermont's Landmark College and Vermont's Greenwood school are two conspicuous leaders. Sadly, the opportunity for imaginative experiment offered to the nation by Vermont's independent schools is resisted at every turn by politicians eager to exploit a naïve resentment of that freedom. And such experimentation is resisted by unimaginative educators who cling to the protections offered by process orthodoxies. Like the bureaucrats in the Agency, they are happy in the embrace of a Behaviorism broadly discredited\* over four score and seven years ago.

The full film "The Address" by Ken Burnes can be viewed [HERE](http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-address/home/).

<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-address/home/>

\* See philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead for some of the best criticism of Behaviorism, philosopher John Searle for some of the most recent, and linguist Noam Chomsky for some of the funniest.

*- Bruce E. Buxton is the Director of The Scandinavian Seminar in Amherst, MA. He has led many accreditation teams for the New England Association of Schools and Colleges and The European Council of International Schools, including the team that first sponsored accreditation of the Greenwood School.*